

An Online Survey:

Community Ministry in the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

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In the fall of 2007, the Ministry and Professional Leadership Staff Group decided to undertake a survey of ministers working in community ministry settings and those seminarians who identified community ministry as their primary vocational setting. The surveys were administered via the online web host Survey Monkey. The survey was designed to capture the experiences and concerns of community ministers as well as the state of community ministry in the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, through the lens of community ministers. While much of the previous research on community ministry focused upon anecdotal stories or qualitative research, the CM survey launched by MPL combined quantitative measures with qualitative, open-ended questions. This allowed for quicker data analysis, but it further offered concrete numbers regarding community ministers and the settings in which they worked. The survey, designed in conjunction with the Society for Community Ministries and the Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association, was written to create clear scales while also leaving ministers and seminarians space to amend comments or include anecdotes.

In total, the CM survey was sent to two hundred twelve community ministers and one hundred eighty-nine seminarians. Ministers were chosen to receive the survey based on an initial database query that eliminated ministers whose primary active ministry was parish-based. In order to best reach the largest sample size, those ministers without current email addresses were sent a letter requesting further contact status. Seminarians were identified according to candidate status. Since there is no database that can search for "intended ministry," all seminarians in candidate status were included in the email invitation. They were requested at the beginning of the survey to self-select. Ministers in preliminary and final fellowship were similarly requested to self-select their position in the fellowship process. Each survey stayed open for one week, with some respondents requesting special arrangements to complete the online forms. Response rates proved to be viable with ministers responding at 43.4% response rate.¹ Seminarian response rates were slightly lower at 25.5%, but it is important to remember that these rates include seminarians who were not eligible to respond since their intended ministry is parish-based.

What follows is a brief assessment of the data produced by the CM survey. This data represents an important opportunity to better understand the shape of community ministry, including the shape of those ministered to and within the diverse settings that community ministers serve. The CM survey provides an opportunity to understand where community ministers most readily work, the challenges they face in their ministries as well as the realistic avenues MPL and other professional organizations may pursue in order to better support the myriad of ministries falling under the umbrella of "community ministry." The CM survey further provides an analysis of seminarian interests, concerns and intended ministries. With nearly a quarter of current candidates identifying themselves as interested in community ministry, the work of better understanding how to support community ministry becomes a project with long-term outcomes. The CM survey hence provides data on the fellowship process as well as

¹ Most statistical programs including SPSS deem a 30% response rate as a generally accepted minimum for viable data.

questions on collegial relationships. Given that community ministry is a relatively new term in fellowship, and that “tracks” have been removed from the fellowship process, the CM survey sought to capture the effects of these important changes in the fellowship process over the last ten years.

Seminarians Pursuing Community Ministry

The seminarian CM survey was sent to one hundred and eighty nine candidates, culled from the Raiser's Edge database. These candidates include individuals who are preparing for parish-based as well as community-based ministries. Candidates were requested to complete the survey only if their intended ministry was primarily community-based. Forty-eight candidates completed the survey, comprising 25.5% of the total sample size. This number is remarkably high given that the sample size included ineligible participants. Furthermore, it indicates that at least 25.5% of current candidates for ministry in the UUA identify their ministry as community-based. Of the forty-eight that completed the survey, forty-one answered every applicable question. The survey included nineteen questions addressing internships, seminary experiences, access to adequate financial assistance, field education, outside job experiences, clinical pastoral education, and mentoring relationships. The questions also directly sought feedback regarding the Regional Sub-Committees on Candidacy as well as the Ministerial Fellowship Committee.

Demographics

Respondents represented fifteen of the twenty districts including: Ballou Channing, Central Midwest, Clara Barton, Florida, Heartland, Joseph Priestly, Massachusetts Bay, Metro New York, Mid-South, Northern New England, Ohio Meadville, Pacific Northwest, Prairie Star, and St. Lawrence. Respondents were 58% female, 25% male, 15% unidentified, and 2% transgender. The sample was not significantly racially or ethnically diverse; 77% of respondents identified as white or Caucasian, 14.5% unidentified, 4.1% as biracial, 2% Latina, and 2.0% Middle Eastern. Data on age was not collected. The respondents represented the two UU theological schools, Starr King School for the Ministry and Meadville-Lombard Theological School, as well as a range of other schools including: Andover Newton Theological School, Harvard Divinity School, Methodist Theological School, United Theological School, Vancouver School of Theology, Boston University, Wesley Theological Seminary, Lexington Theological Seminary, and the Perkins School of Theology. All the candidates anticipated graduating by 2011, and 75% reported that they were currently completing their internship or had recently completed the internship. 92% of respondents reported that they had obtained a sponsoring congregation.

Internship Experiences

Respondents reported that their internship sites were primarily in parish settings (73%). The second most common internship sites were hospital settings (22%) followed by hybrid internships (5%). Candidates were asked to identify how important certain aspects of their internship (worship, pastoral care, teaching, prophetic outreach and practical arts) contributed to their ministerial development on a seven point scale ranging from not at all important to very important. The scale also included a "not applicable" option designed for candidates for whom their internship did not include opportunities for the above-noted competencies. The question was designed to address the internship

guidelines provided by the internship clearinghouse as well as the competencies outlined by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Of those completing internships (75% of respondents) 45.8% endorsed worship as very important to their “ministerial development.” Respondents similarly independently endorsed pastoral care (60.4%), teaching (22.9%), prophetic outreach (29.2%), and practical arts (39.6%) as very important aspects to their ministerial development. When respondents were asked how relevant the competencies were to their ministries, the numbers dropped slightly (worship 35.4%, pastoral care 58.3%, teaching 18.8%, prophetic outreach 27.1%, practical arts 39.6%). Furthermore, respondents provided suggestions for enriching internships including: deeper engagement with non-profits, grant-writing education, and connecting community ministry to the larger movement. Respondents further noted the amount of time spent in their internship and their hope that if competencies (such as entrepreneur training) were added that other competences be “subtracted.”

General Seminary Experiences

Respondents were asked to rate their seminary experiences including curriculum, collegial relationships, advisor and/or mentor, field education, financial aid/assistance, clinical pastoral education and outside job experience. Seminary experiences were rated on a seven-point scale, with 1 representing not at all helpful and seven corresponding to very helpful. Of the 48 respondents, 32.6% found their curriculum at least somewhat helpful in their developing understanding of community ministry. 34.8% of seminarians found collegial relationships to be very helpful, and 37% also found field education was helpful to their understanding of community ministry. Advisor and/or mentors were endorsed by 26% of seminarians as somewhat helpful. Clinical pastoral education and outside job experiences received the highest ratings by seminarians as very helpful to their development in community ministry (58.7% and 45.7% respectively). 34.8% of seminarians noted that financial aid or assistance was not available to them.

Regional Sub-committees on Candidacy

Of those who met with a RSCC (n=46), 28.3% reported that they found the committee’s feedback very helpful. The same was true for the two individuals who were considered candidates, but had not met with the RSCC since they entered the fellowship process before the development of the RSCC. Similarly high ratings, as rated on a seven-point scale, were reported for the career assessment, letters of reference, preparation for committee, and packet preparation (a “high” rating constituted by a 5.5 or greater).

Ministerial Fellowship Committee

Of those responding to the survey, 28.9% had met with the MFC (n=13) and another 20% (n=9) had scheduled their interview. This may suggest that candidates are delaying their interview with the MFC after meeting with the RSCC. As with the RSCC, feedback was given the highest rating, with 41.6% of respondents endorsing the feedback they received as “very helpful to one’s ministry.” The ratings were as follows for the remaining categories: packet preparation (47% found it very helpful), fulfilling competences (20% found it somewhat helpful), obtaining a sponsoring congregation (38% found it somewhat helpful), letters of reference (33% found it somewhat helpful),

reading list (33% found it very helpful), mock interviews (the majority of seminarians did not have mock interviews), and the meeting itself (36% found it very helpful).

Overall Expectations for Ministry

39% of seminarians reported that they did not have a mentoring relationship. Of those who had a mentor (61%), 70% of those with a mentor reported that their mentor was not a community minister. As noted above, seminarians further expressed that they wanted additional access to financial aid. 41.5% of respondents were currently receiving UUA grant monies, with 58.5% not receiving any monies from UU scholarships or grants.

In regard to intended community ministry, 70% reported that pastoral care would be their primary ministry. Respondents further reported advocacy and witness (39%), social services (36.3%), denominational services (29%) and academia (12%) as settings for their ministries. 18 respondents noted ministries in other settings including spiritual direction, part-time parish and community ministries, as well as congregational support ministries. While the context for community ministry is diverse, this data would suggest that the majority of seminarians are pursuing pastoral care in some context.

Seminarians listed realistic expectations and concerns for their ministry including balancing a family life, finding a job, and paying of student loans and debt acquired during seminary. These concerns seem comparable to seminarians across the board regardless of their particular ministry. Yet, several seminarians identified concerns that were particular to community ministers including strengthening connections with denominational services, finding collegial support in non-UU settings and connecting their ministry to the life of congregations.

Community Ministers in Preliminary Fellowship

The second CM survey sent out by the Ministry and Professional Leadership Staff Group targeted community ministers in preliminary and final fellowship. The survey was sent to two hundred and twelve ministers who had been identified through MPL's database as either serving in community ministry or in a hybrid ministry. Those ministers working for the UUA or district services were also included since their primary ministry was no longer parish-based. 92 ministers responded, comprising a 43.4% response rate, which thereby made the data viable. Of those who responded, 40 identified themselves as in preliminary fellowship with the remaining 52 in final fellowship.

Of those in preliminary fellowship (n=40), 33% were in their first year of ministry and 74% noted that they entered preliminary fellowship as a community minister. Ministers in preliminary fellowship were asked questions regarding their affiliation with a congregation, collegial relationships, continuing education, seminary experiences, and the renewal process. What follows is an assessment of ministers currently in preliminary fellowship.

Report of Community Ministers currently in Preliminary Fellowship:

Demographics

Over half of community ministers in preliminary fellowship (54%) were employed full-time, followed by 36% who identified their employment as part-time and 9% bi-vocational. One-third of respondents noted that their employment does not include health benefits. Given the nature of community ministry (patchwork, part-time, self-employment) health benefits and adequate compensation were noted struggles for ministers in preliminary fellowship. Respondents represented twelve UUA districts including: Ballou Channing, Central Midwest, Clara Barton, Heartland, Joseph Priestly, Massachusetts Bay, Metro New York, Mountain Desert, Pacific Central, Pacific Northwest, Prairie Star, and Thomas Jefferson. They further attended a diverse listing of seminaries including Starr King, Meadville Lombard, Union Theological Seminary, Harvard Divinity School, New York Theological Seminary, Ilif School of Theology, Boston University, and Andover Newton Theological School. They identified as 80% female and 20% male. 77% of respondents self-identified as Caucasian or Euro-American, 6.5% self-identified as Black, and 6.5% self-identified as bi-racial.

Collegial Relationships

64% of those ministers in preliminary fellowship reported that they met with UU colleagues at least monthly compared with 38% who indicated that they met with colleagues in their vocational field weekly. This monthly meeting with UU colleagues is vague, however, as it may indicate chapter meetings, church attendance, or other interactions with UU colleagues. 72% of ministers in preliminary fellowship reported that these meetings were organized by the district. 57% of community ministers in preliminary fellowship met with congregationally-based ministers at least monthly.

Furthermore, 40% of these same ministers who met with congregationally-based ministers reported that they met monthly with non-UU ministers in community settings.

When rating the quality and meaningfulness of collegial relationships, some significant differences begin to emerge. While 61% of ministers in preliminary fellowship identified their relationship with UU colleagues as “good,” when rating their relationship with colleagues within their vocational field 50% found the relationship to be “excellent.” While 59.9% of ministers in preliminary fellowship rated their relationship with UU colleagues as very meaningful, 76% rated relationships with colleagues within their vocational field as very meaningful.

Continuing Education

Of those identified as ministers in preliminary fellowship (n=40), 30 noted that they participated in some form of continuing education. The vast majority (59%) listed CENTER as the primary source of education followed by seminary supplements (50%), OMEGA (13%) and Alban (13%). 25 ministers further identified additional sources of educational development related to professional certification or resources (e.g. ACPE). Rated on a seven-point scale cost, geographic accessibility and time availability all received moderate ratings of reasonable (endorsed by 46.9%, 48.4% and 43.3% respectively). 30% of ministers endorsed the value to their ministry as “very reasonable.”

Preliminary Fellowship Experiences:

Affiliation (Formerly Known As Endorsement)

Of those community ministers in preliminary fellowship, the majority (66.7%) reported that they had affiliated with a congregation. A remaining 5% noted that their affiliation was with a district, and nearly 20% described their affiliation as in process (without identifying with whom the affiliation was sought). Only 7% of respondents said they did not have an affiliation, and of those two reported difficulty in seeking an affiliation with a congregation.

Committee on Ministry

The response to committees on ministry was slightly more mixed. While 28.9% of ministers in preliminary fellowship found their committee very helpful, 26% did not yet have a committee and another 13% rated their committee as less than helpful.

Mentoring Relationship

Across the board, ministers in preliminary fellowship rated their relationship with mentors very high. Respondents were asked how often they met with mentors. 64% responded frequently. 89.7% reported that their mentor was very supportive to their ministry, and a further 82.8% valued this relationship as very meaningful. The data suggests that mentoring relationships are very important to community ministers. Furthermore, mentoring relationships that were rated as very meaningful correlated with higher satisfaction with committees on ministry, but not with the renewal process.

Renewal Process

While the majority of ministers had not yet submitted renewal paperwork, of those that had nearly 22% found the forms only somewhat applicable to their ministry. A further 14% found the language somewhat applicable. This data is compounded by short answer responses where 14 individuals (out of 40) found the renewal process particularly difficult for community ministers noting the language of the paperwork, the lack of education of congregations and an overall sense of “disconnection with the UUA.” They further noted that the process itself is difficult and confusing.

Seminary Experiences

Ministers were asked to evaluate their internship experiences. The ratings were as follows: worship (48.6%), pastoral care (58.8%), teaching (48.5%), prophetic outreach (44.1%), practical arts (47.1%), relationship with supervisor (64.7%), internship committee (51.5%) and internship evaluations (44.1%). This data suggests that internship experiences were rated overall as “important to one’s ministry” by ministers in preliminary fellowship. The nature of internships was very different for ministers in preliminary fellowship than seminarians. Many internships were hybrids. Ministers noted completing multiple internships, with at least one described as parish-based.

Ministers further found that in seminary collegial relationships (44.1%), advisors and/or mentors (47.1%), and field education (55.9%) were very helpful to developing an understanding of community ministry. As with seminarians, curriculum and financial aid/assistance received slightly lower ratings with 20% of ministers in preliminary fellowship noting that financial aid/assistance was unavailable to them in seminary. This may be attributed to a desire for entrepreneurial classes and further aid, a trend that was noted in the qualitative responses evoked by the “general seminary” textbox.

RSCC Experiences

32% of ministers currently in preliminary fellowship did not have an RSCC meeting before the MFC. Of those that did experience the RSCC, most rated the career assessment, letters of reference, preparation for the meeting, packet, and feedback as at least “somewhat helpful to their development in community ministry.”

MFC Experience

According to the majority of ministers in preliminary fellowship, every aspect of the MFC experience including packet preparation, fulfilling competencies, obtaining a sponsoring congregation, letters of reference, reading list, mock interviews, experience of the meeting and feedback from the committee was very helpful to their development in community ministry. Obtaining a sponsoring congregation received the lowest average rating, with only 24.2% of ministers noting it as “very helpful.”

Shape of Community Ministry for Ministers in Preliminary Fellowship

The majority of ministers in preliminary fellowship (57.1%) identified pastoral care as their primary ministry. This figure was followed by social services (20%), denominational services (11%), advocacy and witness (8.6%) and academia (2.9%) as primary fields for ministry. Community ministers further reported that they often attend church services (60%), UUMA chapter meetings (28.6%) and district meetings (31%). The figures for UUMA chapter meetings and district meetings may be slightly lower

given the size of some districts and difficulty that community ministers face in personal time off from community-based vocations.

Final Fellowship Survey Results

52 ministers in final fellowship responded the CM survey. This number comprises 56% of the total respondents. Data analysis for ministers in final fellowship was analyzed against data collected from those in preliminary fellowship. The hope was to observe trends or changes in fellowship as well as note salient concerns for ministers in final fellowship that differ from their colleagues in preliminary fellowship or seminary. Ministers in final fellowship were asked questions regarding demographics, continuing education, professional organizations, collegial relationships, experiences in preliminary fellowship, seminary experiences, as well as general concerns/feedback for experiences in final fellowship.

Demographics

67% of ministers in final fellowship described their employment as full-time. While 25.8% reported part-time employment and 6% bi-vocational, it would seem to suggest that the trend in final fellowship is towards full-time employment, especially given that the sample included several ministers currently retired. Unlike ministers in preliminary fellowship, however, 53.8% of ministers in final fellowship reported that community ministry was not the ministry they began in during the fellowship process. Of 28 respondents, eighteen reported that their employment provides benefits, two purchased health benefits, and eight indicated they do not have current healthcare benefits. Not surprising when asked about their benefits on a seven point scale (with 1 being poor and 7 excellent) the average was 4.68 indicating compensation was fair.

Ministers responding represented 14 districts including: Ballou Channing, Central Midwest, Clara Barton, Florida, Heartland, Joseph Priestly, Massachusetts Bay, Metro New York, Mountain Desert, Northeast, Pacific Northwest, Pacific Southwest, Prairie Star, and Thomas Jefferson. They further represented a diverse sample of theological schools including; Starr King, Meadville-Lombard, Andover Newton Theological School, Harvard Divinity School, Marylhurst Seminary, St. Paul School of Theology, Union, Chicago Theological Seminary, Boston University, Southern Baptist, and Bangor Theological Seminary. One-third of respondents identified as male, and two-third were female. 86% of respondents were white and/or Caucasian, with 14% identifying as Spanish, Italian or Euro-American.

Ministers in final fellowship reported ministering in diverse contexts: 44% pastoral care, 20% advocacy and witness, 17% social services, 8% academia, and 8% denominational services. They further reported clinical work and teaching as aspects of their ministry.

Collegial Relationships

38.6% of ministers noted that they met with UU colleagues at least monthly, while 31.8% met with colleagues within their vocational field monthly. These figures do not represent any significant difference with preliminary fellowship, aside from a slight

shift in frequency in favor of UU colleagues. However, 34.9% of ministers in final fellowship noted that they meet with congregationally-based UU ministers bi-annually and 32% reported that they never meet with other UU ministers working in community settings.

Furthermore, ministers in final fellowship reported a lower quality of relationship with colleagues. 53% rated relationships with UU colleagues as “good” while 65% noted that relationships with colleagues within their vocational field were excellent. This is a similar trend noted in preliminary fellowship, though the overall ratings for relationship quality drop slightly. There was also a significant difference between the meaningfulness of relationships in final fellowship. 52% found relationships with UU colleagues to be “very meaningful” while 78% endorsed relationships with colleagues within a vocational field as “very meaningful.”

Ministers in final fellowship further reported that they attend church services often (47%), as well as General Assembly (26%). These numbers are relatively high when compared with anecdotal evidence suggesting that community ministers in final fellowship often feel disconnected from Unitarian Universalism and their colleagues. They further reported that they sometimes attend UUMA chapter meeting (35%) and district meetings (29%).

Professional Organizations

Community ministers reported that their relationship with the UUMA and SCM was at least fair (22.2%) while their connections to non-UU professional organizations were near excellent (31.8%). These figures are supported by the data on quality and meaningfulness of collegial relationships. While connections with UU professional organizations were not rated as very high, connections with congregations for community ministers were endorsed as excellent (35.6%). Furthermore, community ministers in final fellowship had mixed reactions to their relationship with the district (20% fair, 20% excellent).

Continuing Education

Nearly 50% of the respondents reported participating in some form of continuing education. Since respondents could choose more than one form, the following figures overlap: 63% participated in a seminary, 63% through CENTER, 29.6% through Alban, and 3.7% through OMEGA. Other important sources of continuing education include ACPE, professional certifications, and district resources.

Ministers in final fellowship reported similar figures for how reasonable cost, geographic accessibility and time availability were for continuing education. Ministers reported that all of the above were at least reasonable (59%, 35.9%, 35.1% respectively). In addition to cost, geographic accessibility, and time availability, ministers reported the value to their ministry as more than reasonable (30.8%). The data suggests that ministers in final fellowship take advantage of continuing education resources, finding them accessible as well as valuable.

Preliminary Fellowship Experiences

Committee on Ministry

20% of those in final fellowship did not have a COM. Of those that had COM during the fellowship process, at least 15% found it somewhat helpful with another 27% reporting that their COM was very helpful. These ratings are very similar to those reported by ministers in preliminary fellowship.

Mentoring Relationship

Ministers in final fellowship reported that they had often met with their mentors (55.9%) finding this relationship both very supportive (78%) as well as meaningful (69.7%).

Renewal Process

In general, the renewal process received overall lower ratings by ministers in final fellowship. A significant number found the forms (22%) and language (25%) as not very applicable to community ministry. The majority of respondents (31%) reported that the renewal process was only somewhat applicable. Ministers in final fellowship noted that there were “glaring problems” with the forms when they completed renewals.

Seminary Experiences

Internship Experiences

Ministers in final fellowship endorsed the internship competencies as very meaningful. The ratings were as follows: worship (50%), pastoral care (66.7%), teaching (47.2%), prophetic outreach (34.3%), and practical arts (41%). They further endorsed that their relationship with a supervisor (58.3%), internship committee (41%), and internship evaluations (25.7%) were all very important to their ministry. While 5% noted that the standard competencies were not included in their internship, the ratings suggest that ministers in final fellowship often found parish-based internships at least somewhat applicable to their ministry. It is important to note here, however, that these conclusions are hindered by the fact that the majority of ministers in final fellowship reported entering ministry in parish-based settings. When the type of ministry is controlled for, the ratings for worship, prophetic outreach, practical arts, teaching, and internship evaluations drop slightly. In the short essay responses, ministers noted that competencies “should be tailored to one’s ministry” and that further competencies should not become “requirements” but rather “suggestions.” Ministers further noted a mixture of parish-based and community-based internships.

Overall Seminary Experiences

Commensurate with the data from ministers in preliminary fellowship, those in final fellowship reported that collegial relationships, advisor/mentor relationships, and field education were all very helpful in their developing an understanding of community ministry. Financial aid/assistance received a low rate, with 33% reporting that financial assistance and aid were unavailable to them when they entered seminary. Curriculum was further endorsed by 27% as being somewhat helpful, perhaps reflective of the lack of community ministry focused courses or the respondents’ personal shift in ministerial direction.

RSCC

There was not any viable data for RSCC experiences since 94% did not meet with any RSCC.

MFC

In general, respondents rated their MFC experiences as very helpful. The majority of ministers in final fellowship never obtained sponsorship from a congregation or participated in mock interviews. Yet, they did find packet preparation (22.9%), fulfilling competencies (25.7%), experience of the meeting (37.1%) and feedback from the committee (28.6%) as very helpful. They further endorsed the letters of reference and reading list as helpful

Conclusion

As MPL and others seek to better support community ministry and connect its resources to UU congregations, the data does suggest that efforts made over the last twenty years have been successful. Seminarian ratings were higher than those of ministers in preliminary fellowship, who were still more positive in their evaluations than those in final fellowship. The correlations between developments in the fellowship process (mentoring, RSCC evaluations, amendments to renewal process and MFC guidelines) and positive ratings suggest that by and large the changes in the fellowship process are improvements. Community ministry is better incorporated into the larger ministry of Unitarian Universalism (as this data suggests) than it was twenty years ago. In addition, given that 25% of seminarians identified their primary vocational setting within the community, now is the time to better understand the relationship between community ministry and the Unitarian Universalist movement.

While there is cause to celebrate the changes in community ministry, the data also suggests that there are avenues for continued improvement. Where professional organizations have sought to fill in the resource gap, additional resources may be required to assist community ministers as they create relationships with congregations and transition into new ministries. This survey, in addition to collecting data on the fellowship process was also an opportunity to learn more about the diverse ministries within Unitarian Universalism. From military chaplains to non-profit directors, these ministers often encounter countless individuals each day that would otherwise never set foot within the walls of a UU congregation. Throughout the qualitative component to their stories, ministers and seminarians detailed the powerful ways in which they are the voice of our liberal faith in communities across the country (and even throughout the world). As these ministers bring the good news of Unitarian Universalism into the wider world, it will be crucial to ensure they have the necessary tools.